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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR FOCUSES ON ETHNIC MINORITY AND RELIGIOUS
ISSUES IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS VISIT

REF: A) HCMC 210; B) 04 HCMC 1491; C) 04 HCMC 1590 and previous

1. (SBU) Summary: Officials in the Central Highlands provinces of Lam Dong and Dak Lak told the Ambassador that they are implementing Hanoi's policies to expand religious freedom and to improve the lives of ethnic minorities, but said they would not tolerate "Dega Protestants" using religion for purposes that "go against the country." The Ambassador commended the Government's push to improve conditions for ethnic minorities in the region, but emphasized that authorities would need to be more open and transparent about these issues. Provincial officials voiced suspicions about UNHCR's bona fides, although they said they would implement the tripartite agreement with UNHCR and Cambodia on Montagnard refugees. While officials in Dak Lak remain the most hardest-line in the Central Highlands, they are talking more positively on religion -- a marked improvement from our November 2004 visit (reftel). Whether their rhetoric will be matched by action remains to be seen. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On February 28 and March 1, the Ambassador made official calls on the provincial leadership of the Central Highlands provinces of Lam Dong and Dak Lak. He met with the People's Committees of both provinces, the Deputy Director of the GVN's Central Highlands Steering Committee, the heads of the Committees for Minority and Religious Affairs and the Bishop of the Dak Lak Diocese. Economic development, ethnic minority issues and religious freedom were core focus areas of the visit.

Economic and Social Development

3. (SBU) Provincial officials in Lam Dong and Dak Lak detailed educational, cultural and economic initiatives to resolve longstanding issues in the Central Highlands, including the bans on in-migration by ethnic Kinh Vietnamese and land sales between Montagnards and ethnic Kinh Vietnamese. They claimed that these efforts have improved living conditions for ethnic minorities and reduced tensions in the region.

4. (SBU) The provincial officials claimed that, with the exception of "remote areas," all ethnic minority villages are electrified and that residents have access to schools and health care. They acknowledged that efforts to provide ethnic minorities with expanded land grants and housing benefits have lagged. They said that by the end of 2006 all Montagnards in the two provinces would have adequate housing and land. To prevent deforestation, the Lam Dong government is considering giving cash subsidies to ethnic minorities residing there to care for the forest in lieu of acreage. According to Lam Dong People's Committee Chairman Huynh Duc Hoa, the province devotes 100 billion dong (USD six million) of a 700 billion dong (USD 44 million) budget for ethnic minority assistance programs.

5. (SBU) Brief stops at two ethnic minority villages in Lam Dong Province suggested that at least some progress is being made; the Montagnards the Ambassador visited are at least as prosperous as their neighboring ethnic Vietnamese. However, it is still unclear how representative these two villages are of the overall situation in Lam Dong, let alone the more economically backward and politically hard-line Dak Lak Province. The two villages were on the main road between Dalat and Buon Ma Thuot, while many Montagnards still live in more remote areas of the Central Highlands.

Religious Freedom

6. (SBU) Lam Dong People's Committee Chairman Hoa claimed the Catholics and Protestants are "satisfied" with conditions in the province. He acknowledged that some ethnic minority Protestant communities still face some difficulties "due to historical conditions." Lam Dong Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) Chairman Tran Dinh Nhung told the Ambassador that Lam Dong has recognized 11 Protestant churches and that four more "recognitions" are in process. He acknowledged that Lam Dong has 180 house churches yet to be recognized, but claimed that some of these are already registered at the communal level and thus are allowed to operate. He said that church difficulties in developing formal governing structures are part of the reason why the recognition process is lagging.

7. (SBU) Dak Lak People's Committee Vice Chairman Duong Thanh Tuong said the number of Protestants in Dak Lak has risen from

20,000 to 108,340 in the past 30 years. He noted that the Protestant community has 40 pastors, four lay pastors and four recognized churches. He cited the rapid increase in the number of Protestants as an example of religious freedom, adding that Dak Lak has been implementing the Prime Minister's Order on Protestantism since last Christmas and that every believer is allowed to celebrate at home. Tuong did not address reports (ref B) that provincial officials suppressed Protestant religious practice outside the province's four recognized churches during and after Christmas.

18. (SBU) Dak Lak Diocese Bishop Nguyen Tich Duc complained in front of provincial officials accompanying the Ambassador that his 80 priests are insufficient to minister to the over 300,000 parishioners in the diocese. The Bishop said that he has 12 deacons ready to be ordained but is awaiting issuance of implementing guidelines for the Ordinance on Religion before moving ahead. While avoiding direct criticism of Dak Lak officials, Bishop Duc indicated that without implementation guidelines he has not been able to implement any of the more liberal provisions in the Ordinance on Religion, such as the easing of restrictions on the transfer of priests. The Church is also actively engaged in social work in Dak Lak. Bishop Duc said that, although funding and staffing are issues, the diocese has programs for leprosy and disadvantaged people, including orphans. It runs a school for 100 disabled children, a smaller facility for street children, and 3 boarding schools, one of which is for ethnic minorities. The Bishop said that the quality of education at these schools is higher and more comprehensive than what is available in villages.

CHSC: Oversight of Reform

19. (SBU) The Central Highlands Steering Committee (CHSC), also known as the Central Highlands Development Authority, was created by the GVN in 2000 to coordinate development in the area. However, it only formally inaugurated its operations in late 2004. According to CHSC Deputy Director Nguyen Vy Ha -- who previously served as the People's Committee Chairman of Gia Lai Province -- the CHSC has a GVN mandate to work with provincial governments to implement GVN directives, including on ethnic minority issues. Ha reports to Executive Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, who heads the CHSC. Ha explained that the Committee is composed of leaders from the Central Highlands provinces and ministries "related" to the Central Highlands. It does not have its own budget.

110. (SBU) Deputy Director Ha claimed progress has been made in the lives of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. He explained that differences in education levels between ethnic minorities and ethnic Kinh Vietnamese pose a significant challenge; the education and economic gap between the ethnic minority and majority has grown as the region's economic development has accelerated. Ha said that Dak Nong and Kon Tum provinces face the greatest difficulties in dealing with development and ethnic minority issues.

111. (SBU) According to Ha, the Prime Minister's Decree on Protestantism and the Ordinance on Religion will be implemented fully in the Central Highlands. He would like to see more churches recognized in the region as soon as possible. He added that when churches fail to meet the conditions for GVN recognition, they have the right to register with the local authorities to regularize their status. He emphasized that it is the responsibility of local authorities to help Protestants to have a place to worship and to assist clergy to receive proper instruction.

UNHCR, the Tripartite Agreement and Visas 93

112. (SBU) The Ambassador emphasized to his hosts that that the USG does not support the flight of Montagnards to Cambodia and that the way forward requires both sides to work together to find durable economic and social solutions to the area's problems. Dak Lak People's Committee Vice Chairman Tuong asserted that authorities are committed to following the Tripartite Agreement to accept those Montagnard refugees who wish to return to Vietnam. He cautioned that Vietnamese authorities still have to verify exactly who left and why before implementing the agreement. The Ambassador gave Tuong a list of 15 Montagnard families from Dak Lak seeking family reunification under the Visas 93 program who thus far have not been able to get their passports issued. Tuong said he would try to assist. The Ambassador also inquired about the welfare of 13 Montagnards who self-repatriated back to Vietnam in the fall of 2004 and said he would like to meet them on a future visit.

113. (SBU) CHSC Deputy Director Ha repeated Vietnamese claims that UNHCR is not to be trusted because it allegedly has incited Montagnards to flee to Cambodia. He claimed he experienced this phenomenon first-hand when he was in Gia Lai. Nonetheless, he said the GVN will honor the Tripartite Agreement, but asked that the United States use its influence with the UNHCR to "prevent future incidents." The Ambassador said that he believes the GVN's

information about UNHCR activities is incorrect. He stressed that there are good opportunities now to renew faith and trust, and pledged that he would work to see the agreement carried out by all parties.

MIAs, Investment Dispute

14. (SBU) The Ambassador told Ha that in the last several years the United States has not been able to conduct MIA recoveries in the Central Highlands. He said that whenever this issue is raised with local authorities, we are referred back to the Central Government, and vice versa. The Ambassador asked the CHSC to press local authorities to restart recovery operations. Ha responded that the problem with recovery operations is that information regarding possible recovery sites is often incorrect due to the aging population. The Ambassador noted that this is all the more reason to move with greater speed. In Dak Lak, the Ambassador also pressed local authorities to finally resolve an ongoing investment dispute involving a local coffee company and a U.S. firm. Krong Ana, owned by the Dak Lak People's Committee, has agreed to buy out its U.S. joint venture partner, McCullagh International Inc., but has yet to pay the agreed-upon price.

Comment

15. (SBU) Of the two provinces, officials in Dak Lak were clearly more "security conscious." The local "minders" shadowed the Ambassador throughout his stay there, and officials were present at every meeting, including his discussion with Bishop Duc. A meeting at Central Highlands University was carefully controlled and the Ambassador was not given access to students. Just prior to the Ambassador's visit, the university, on the orders of provincial leaders, turned down an offer to host a visiting U.S. speaker, the second time this had occurred in less than three months.

16. (SBU) Nonetheless, the tone and content of the Ambassador's discussions with Dak Lak provincial officials and CHSC Deputy Chairman Ha were more positive than in our previous visits (reftels), particularly on religious issues. For example, in November, officials in Dak Lak told us that they recognized only 3,000 Protestants in the province and refused to acknowledge the existence of any house churches whatsoever. Their acknowledgement that they need to implement new Hanoi directives on religion and ethnic minority economic development at least give us the opening to press for concrete change. It will be an uphill task in Dak Lak: our contacts in the Protestant community continue to report no real let-up in the pressure on unregistered house churches.

End Comment.

WINNICK